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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to identify some of the reasons for problems in American-British communication, particularly in the use of intonational contours by male and female speakers. One major contrast between British and American speech is found in the use of heads. Rising heads seem to be more frequent in British English, whereas a neutral head is more prevalent in American speech. The British rising head is interpreted by Americans as a tone used with children, while the rising head in American speech is used to show doubt, and is used mostly by women. The British falling nuclei convey either hostility or involvement (the Low Drop and the High Drop, respectively), whereas in American English this is true only for women. The low drop in American English is often a pleasant pattern, without the negative implications associated with the British pattern. An upglided nucleus is rare in American male speech, but more common in American female speech. Since rising nuclei are common in both men's and women's speech in British English, that could account for the fact that British men often sound effeminate to Americans. These and other tentative findings could be important factors in the English as a second language classroom. (AH)

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A COMPARISON OF MALE AND FEMALE INTONATION IN AMERICAN

AND BRITISH SPEECH

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My first interest in sex differences in intonation patterns occurred a number of years ago when, in a phonology class designed for teachers of English from various parts of the Soviet Union, I found that I was dissatisfied with the intonation of some of my male students, although they appeared to be mimicking accurately the patterns I provided for them. That experience led to a study of male and female differences in general American English intonation, the preliminary results of which were presented at the Seventh International Congress of Phonetic Sciences in Montreal in 1971.¹ My interest in this area has continued, although I have been more involved in tagmemic grammar and phonology. This paper, however, is an attempt to relate the earlier work to British English.

A short time ago, when in Norway on the Fulbright program, I began a comparison of British and American intonation, in collaboration with Professor Eva Sivertsen. We decided to use the basic over-all framework as proposed by O'Connor and Arnold² since their work is widely used in western Europe. I will also use their system here--that is, I will describe contours as being composed of heads and nuclei.

In general there seems to be a considerable amount of faulty communication between speakers of British and American English because of

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different meanings of intonation contours, and of different restrictions on their usage. Perhaps just one anecdote will illustrate: Not long ago Eunice Pike recounted to me her observations in a situation in which announcements in an institute's dining room were made alternately by American and British speakers, to British and American students and faculty. By careful questioning and observation, she learned that the British members of the audience felt that the British announcer spoke in a routine, ordinary fashion, but that the American always sounded angry and out-of-sorts. On the other hand, Miss Pike and the other Americans felt that the American made announcements in a neutral, unremarkable manner, but that the Britisher caused them to react negatively in that he seemed to be speaking as he would to children, and had a rather patronising manner. This paper will attempt to identify some of the reasons for that kind of problem in American-British communication.

Of course, as a non-native speaker of British English I must mainly rely on the studies of others for the meanings of British intonation contours. I will, therefore, primarily refer to the meanings given by O'Connor and Arnold. In addition, the problem is multiplied because of the variety of dialects in Great Britain and the United States. This study, therefore, is limited to General (midwestern) American and the dialect described by O'Connor and Arnold.

I will here mention just a few of the prominent differences I have noted in British and American English, with regard to the use of intonation contours by male and female speakers.³

(1) One major contrast is that of heads and pre heads. In American English, neutral mid-level pitch heads and pre heads are widely prevalent. In these, word-stressed syllables have a slightly higher tone than unstressed syllables, but the over-all effect is that of a very even pitch. For example, That's just the way it is; I'm going home right away. Therefore, any other type of head is very noticeable and marked in American English. On the other hand, rising heads in particular seem to be more frequent in British English. (The high head of British English is very similar to the normal head of American speakers, when there is some emphasis involved.) The British rising head is very marked, to an American speaker, as one that is often used when speaking to children, in order to reassure them. This is particularly true when a rising head is followed by a rising nucleus as in That's all right now. However, O'Connor and Arnold state that this combination is used "to encourage further conversation" (143), but make no mention of its use with children.

In fact, rising heads and rising nuclei in American adult speech are used mainly to show incredulity or doubt and are much more used by American women than by American men. This is due, in part, to the marked frequency of falling nuclei in the speech of American men, and their avoidance of all but a final low pitch.

It is obvious that the lexical content of sentences, together with the particular intonation contour used, has much to contribute to the interpretation of sentences. One might wish therefore that O'Connor and Arnold had provided more examples which were neutral in lexical content so that the content and the intonation meaning were not in a one-to-one correspondence.

That is, on pp. 106 and 103 where O'Connor and Arnold state that a low fall contour is strong in commands, one would appreciate some sentences which were not strong themselves in lexical content. Thus, in my analysis also I have looked for examples such as the preceding one, where doubt is clearly added by the rising contour, and not inherent in the included words. O'Connor and Arnold's examples of strong commands, such as Do it yourself then and Now stop it you two, seem to be so strong in themselves that the intonation contour does not seem to play much part in the general effect.

(2) Regarding the falling nuclei of British English, O'Connor and Arnold state that tone group 1, The Low Drop, is cool, dispassionate and, at times, hostile, while tone group 2, The High Drop, conveys a sense of involvement. In American English this is in general true for women only. With appropriate vocal quality, the low drop in American men's speech is a frequent and common pleasant pattern, without the negative connotations mentioned for British English. This is probably the reason for the negative implications observed by Miss Pike in the anecdote mentioned previously.

(3) A nucleus which ends in a rise is virtually unknown utterance finally in American men's speech, or, at least, is used only in the most exceptional circumstances. That is, it is only utterance medially, or on certain very rare occasions where extreme doubt or incredulity is implied utterance finally that American men use any form of an upglided nucleus. They are much more common, however, in American women's speech. Since, however, rising nuclei seem to be common in both men and women's speech in British English, that could account for the observation that British men often sound effeminate to Americans.

Thus far I have spoken of male female differences in American English intonation, and their relationships to some British patterns, but have not given any differences in male and female British speech. My remarks here are quite tentative, although a few preliminary observations might be made. Firstly, the difference I have mentioned in the use by American men versus women of O'Connor's tone 1 and tone 2 (long and short falling nuclei) does not seem to be paralleled in British English. That is, the meanings given for these groups seem to hold true for both men and women in Great Britain. Instead, British women seem to have a greater pitch differentiation in these glides--at least tone 2 seems to start considerably higher in women's speech than in men's. Extra high points and extra long glides constitute perhaps the greatest difference in British women's intonation when compared to that of men. Thus, high heads in women's speech seem to be extremely high when compared to men's. In addition, women's rising nuclei usually seem to end much higher than those of British men.

I have written elsewhere⁴ of the importance of some of these findings for the foreign-language classroom. It must be obvious that a teacher at the very least, must warn his students concerning male and female differences in intonation, so that the student does not unwittingly mimick the opposite sex. In addition, some of the differences between different dialects of English, such as I have mentioned, should be useful. Hopefully this and future such studies will contribute to much better communication.

Footnotes

¹"Male-Female Intonation Patterns in American English," Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Phonetic Sciences, The Hague: Mouton, 1972, pp. 866-870, reprinted in B. Thorne and N. Henley, eds., Language and Sex, Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, pp. 84-87.

²J. D. O'Connor and G. F. Arnold, Intonation of Colloquial English, 2nd edition, London: Longman Group Ltd., 1973.

³Some of these are included in my study with Professor Sivertsen.

⁴"The Inclusion of Male-Female Differences in Foreign-Language Pedagogy," Speech Education, Association Internationale de Linguistique Appliquee, 1977, to appear.